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No. 9.

{ COMPLETE. }

FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 34 & 36 NORTH MOORE STREET, NEW YORK.
New York, November 19, 1892.

ISSUED WEEKLY.

{ PRICE
5 CENTS. }

Vol. I

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Frank Reade, Jr.,

WITH HIS NEW STEAM HORSE IN THE GREAT AMERICAN DESERT;
or, THE SANDY TRAIL OF DEATH.

By "NONAME."



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FRANK READE, JR.,

With His New Steam Horse in the Great American Desert;

OR,

THE SANDY TRAIL OF DEATH.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Frank Reade, Jr., With His New Steam Horse Among the Cowboys; or, The League of the Plains," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE CASE OF BENJAMIN ASTLEY.

WHEN it became noised about that Frank Reade, Jr., the distinguished inventor, was about to make a trip to the far West with his wonderful Steam Horse, public interest became greatly excited.

For those of my readers who may never have read any of the accounts of his wonderful adventures, I will state that Frank Reade, Jr., was a wonderful inventor of marvelous things; that his father was a famous inventor before him, and that Frank, Jr., took to the trade as naturally as a duck does to water.

Years ago, Frank Reade, Sr., had founded the town of Readestown, U. S. A.

And there had erected large machine shops, to which the younger Reade greatly added in later days.

The new Steam Man, invented by Frank Reade, Jr., had made a great furor.

But apropos of this came the New Steam Horse, and for a marvel of ingenuity and mechanical skill, it simply could not be surpassed.

For the benefit of certain of my readers, I will give a brief description of the New Steam Horse; a better idea of which, however, can be gathered from a study of the artist's picture upon the front page of this book.

Then we will proceed to the exciting incidents of this story, which will describe a most exciting trip into a strange region.

The Steam Horse was the pattern of an ordinary equine done in steel. The body was made of steel plates, ingeniously fastened with various joints and bosses.

It is easy enough to make the likeness of a horse thus, but to make it mechanical, to gallop and display other evidences of life, is by no means so easy.

Frank Reade, Jr., realized this, but he was not one to be baffled in a given undertaking.

He was some while in studying out the problem.

But it came at last.

Of course, to go with the Horse there must be a wagon.

But first Frank designed the mechanism of the Horse.

In the plan which he drew, he located the furnace in the chest of the Horse, with a door to open so that coal could be thrown in.

The main body of the Horse contained the boiler. It was an easy matter thus to get up steam.

Upon the saddle was placed the steam gauge and indicator. Between the Horse's ears was placed the whistle.

The nostrils contained the escape valve, and the lower jaw of the Horse connected with the throttle and whistle valves, so that pressure upon a long pair of reins would regulate the speed of the Horse.

The most difficult matter, however, was the delicate armatures and driving rods of the legs.

The cylinders were placed upon the shafts of the wagon.

These propelled the driving rods, which in turn worked heavy armatures, which caused the Horse's legs to take a long and quick stride.

The hind legs were worked in the same manner by means of driving rods connected with the armature of the forward legs.

It was astonishing to note with what marvelous rapidity the Steam Horse would pick up its feet and gallop.

Steel spikes upon his feet enabled him to go all the faster.

We have imperfectly described the Horse; now, let us take a look at the wagon.

In this the travelers were to ride, and it was necessary that it should be safe and strong.

It was made with four strong iron wheels with grooved tires of rubber, so that the roughest ground could be traveled over.

The body of the wagon was of thinly rolled but tough steel.

The interior was quite spacious and vigorously divided up into various uses.

A coal bunker was provided upon the sides of the wagon.

Over these were cushioned seats, easily made into sleeping bunks. Forward by the high dasher was a compartment for the storing of provisions and any necessary stores.

But the most wonderful of all was the canopy or top which covered the wagon.

This was made of thin but bullet-proof plates of steel arranged like a window-lattice, so that by touching a spring the four sides would promptly roll up, leaving the wagon open on all sides.

When the lattice work was down loopholes were provided in it by means of which shots could be fired at an attacking foe.

Altogether the new Steam Horse was a wonderful invention and quite a safe equipage to travel across the plains of the wild West with.

At least Frank Reade, Jr., thought so, and did not hesitate to risk the trip.

His only traveling companions upon his famous trips were two faithful servants, a jolly Irishman known as Barney O'Shea, and a comical mope of a negro called Pomp.

Barney and Pomp were unique characters to a certainty.

While the best of friends in reality, they were constantly engaged in badgering and teasing each other.

One was as well gifted in this direction as the other, so they generally came out about even.

The object of Frank Reade, Jr.'s proposed trip to the West was a thrilling one.

His attention had one day been claimed by a singular statement in a newspaper.

The statement read thus:

"The Mystery of a Marked Bullet."

"A strange incident for which a man is now languishing in Silver City jail awaiting the execution of a sentence of death for murder.

"Six months ago a party of prospectors were coming over the Divide by a rocky foot trail.

"There were twelve in the party, and they were all miners. Some had had fair luck, and others were going home empty-handed.

"Suddenly one of them espied what he believed was a huge buffalo grazing in the canyon far below.

"At once the question of marksmanship came up. There were two expert shots in the party, Bert Mason and Sid Powell.

"A wager was made as to which one could hit the buffalo. It was arranged that both should shoot at the same time, using marked bullets.

"The bullet nearest the buffalo's heart should belong to the winner.

"The trick was quickly made, the stakes put up, and both men fired.

"The supposed buffalo leaped in the air with a wild yell of pain and fell to the ground, while a mule cantered away up the canyon.

"The object had not been a buffalo, but a white man with a fur coat on riding slowly along on a mule.

"Of course Mason and Powell looked at each other with horror.

"Great beavers, Sid!" gasped Mason, "we've killed a man!"

"I swan that's so!" agreed Bert Mason, in horror. "What'll we do?"

"Of course there was nothing else to do but to climb down and see if the victim was really dead.

"The two horrified prospectors did so.

"They found that the man was dead to a certainty. One bullet had lodged in his brain and the other in his shoulder.

"The bullet in the brain of course was the fatal one, and that bore Bert Mason's mark.

"It looked as if he was the real murderer, if the affair could be called murder. What made the matter worse, however, was the fact that the man was a prominent citizen of Silver City.

"Neither Mason nor Powell dared to go to Silver City after that.

"Both cut sticks and went into the woods to hide. Sid Powell was killed by Indians, but Bert Mason became a road agent.

"He was hunted for years for the murder of Clem Johnson. Suddenly he disappeared and was seen no more in those parts.

"But six months ago a man was arrested in Silver City who answered his description to a jot, and who went by the name of Benjamin Astley.

"He was horrified when accused of being identical with Mason. He was at the altar with a happy bride-elect when arrested. The shock nearly killed the bride, who fainted upon the spot.

"Astley is in a terrible state of mind. He has detectives looking for the real Bert Mason. What makes the case look worse for Astley was the fact that one of the marked bullets was found upon him, and it tallied with the one found in Clem Johnson's skull.

"Astley has been convicted as the murderer and will doubtless hang. Yet the evidence would look to be purely circumstantial, and an innocent man may suffer for the crime."

Frank Reade, Jr., had become deeply interested in the complex case.

"That man is innocent!" he declared, with firm conviction. "It is too bad to hang him upon such evidence."

"Bejabers, I believe yez are roight, sor!" agreed Barney O'Shea.

"I done flink dat man am de victim ob cirkumstances!" declared Pomp, sagely.

"The real murderer Mason is no doubt at large now," cried Frank. "I declare he ought to be found."

The more Frank thought of the matter the better satisfied he became that the ends of justice were being defeated.

"That is jnst the hot-headed way they do things in the West," he declared. "Upon my word it is awful."

Finally a resolution seized Frank.

One morning he came down to the shop and gave orders to have the Steam Horse made ready for a trip.

Of course the workmen set about it without asking questions.

But the report got abroad and many and various were the surmises.

Finally one of the curious ones ventured to approach Frank point blank.

"Where are you going this time, Mr. Reade? Not to the North Pole?"

"No," replied Frank, crisply. "I am going West to find Bert Mason the true murderr of Clem Johnson. If it is in my power, I mean to clear up the mystery and set this unfortunate Benjamin Astley right once more. I shall hope for success."

CHAPTER II.

THE QUICKSAND.

THERE was no other motive on Frank's part otherwise than to see justice done.

He was a great lover of fair-play and although Astley and all the parties concerned were strangers to him, he wanted to see the wrong righted.

Barney and Pomp had become fully as interested in the case as he had himself.

"Yo' kin jes' bet we'll stick by yo' Marse Frank!" cried Pomp.

"Yo' hab got de right ob it."

"Be jabers, if that Mason was any part av a man, he'd cum forrard an' shoulder the blame hisself," said Barney.

"Ah! but I imagine that he is a big rascal!" declared Frank. "It will be our work to find him."

"Shure we'll do that!"

"I hope so!"

So it happened, that one day the Steam Horse was packed in sections and shipped to a small station on the verge of the Great American Desert.

Frank had got a slight clew that Mason was hiding in the desert to avoid arrest.

If it was true, it would now be in order to find him.

This Frank meant to do if such a thing was possible.

The Steam Horse had been shipped to the nearest point to the desert.

Several hundred miles, however, of a wild country had to be crossed.

The young inventor knew that the deadly Comanche Indians frequently ranged as far north as this.

To fall in with any of them would be unpleasant, to say the least.

However, Frank was not the one to borrow trouble.

He unloaded the Steam Horse at the little Western station and had the sections put together by skilled mechanics who had come on the special train.

Then, getting aboard the wagon with Barney and Pomp, after steam had been got up, the start was made.

The Steam Horse started away across the desolate plains at a rapid gallop.

Soon the railroad station and every other sign of civilization was out of sight.

As far as the eye could reach upon either hand naught could be seen but an unbroken expanse of plain.

It was a dreary and desolate sight.

For a whole day this sort of thing was encountered. Then at night a small lake was sighted.

"Begorra!" cried Barney. "We'll 'ave a dhrink av that water anyway!"

So the Celt alighted from the wagon when the shores of the lake were reached, and bending down applied his lips to the water.

He took a deep draught of the liquid, and the next moment he wished he had not done so.

With a gasping cry he leaped to his feet.

"Bad luck to the same!" he howled. "Shure it's the devil's own kind av stuff. It's nigh burned the mouth off me."

"Why, of course, you silly fellow," cried Frank. "Don't you know that the water in all of the lakes in this part of the country is salt."

"Shure I know it now, to me sorrow," cried Barney, holding on to his mug.

Then a brilliant thought came to him.

The mischievous spirit of the fellow was at once aroused.

Pomp was in the wagon busying himself about the cooking and had not seen Barney's experience.

The Celt chuckled.

"Och hone!" he muttered. "I'll paralyze that naygur now or me name ain't Barney O'Shea."

With this he procured a dipper and filled it with the water from the lake.

The liquid was as clean and fresh looking as if it had just come from the best of springs.

Barney held the dipper up and shouted:

"Whurroo! I say, naygur! Wud yez luk this way?"

"What fo' yo' want ob me?" cried Pomp, coming to the door of the wagon.

"Don't yez want a dhrink? Shure I think yez might be dhry."

Pomp was very thirsty.

Therefore he replied eagerly:

"All right, I'ish, yo' fetch me dat watah an' I cook yo' sumfin' good fo' yo' supper. Dat am a fac'."

"All roight, bejabers," cried Barney. "I'll take ye on that, naygur."

So Barney went up to the wagon with the dipper filled with the saline fluid.

Pomp took the dipper and glanced at the water.

It looked to him as pure and delicious as nectar.

Tipping his head back, he proceeded to pour it down his throat in copious draughts. The effect was terrific.

For a moment he was doubled up like a jumping jack, with awful contortion of the features.

It was a question for a few moments if he would not actually collapse with strangulation.

But he managed to get his breath after a moment.

As for Barney, he was turning somersaults in the sand, and fairly killing himself with laughter.

"Begorra, that's the funniest I ever seen in me loife yit!" he roared.

"Shure, the fools are not all dead yit, on me sowl!"

"Ki—yi—huh! Golly massy sakes! I'se mos' dead, yes I is. Gor-ramighty, I jes' kill yo' fo' dat, I'ish!"

Pomp, now recovered, made a dash out of the wagon for Barney.

Had he caught the Celt at that moment, he would no doubt have pitched into him in good earnest.

But the Celt was too quick.

He was away over the plain like a bullet out of a gun.

Pomp chased him for full three hundred yards, when an astonishing thing happened.

Suddenly Barney gave a yell, floundered about for a moment, and seemed to be drawn by some irresistible power downward into the ground.

He sank to his hips in a jiffy in the clear sand, and seemed likely to sink much deeper.

In an instant both Barney and Pomp realized the serious truth.

Barney had inadvertently jumped into a prairie quicksand.

The treacherous sand had closed over him with a vise-like grip, and was every moment drawing him deeper.

Of course to be drawn to the depths of the fatal quicksand meant death.

At once all thoughts of fooling left the minds of both.

Pomp forgot the trick played upon him, and saw only that Barney was in most imminent danger of his life.

At once the darcy sought steps to relieve his companion.

"Golly sakes! what am de mattah, I'ish?" cried Pomp, in alarm, halting on the verge of the bed of quicksand.

"Shure the sand is a-suckin' me in faster an' faster," cried Barney.

"Shure wud yez help me, Misther Frank?"

But Frank Reade, Jr., had already seen the trouble.

He was coming to the spot as fast as he could.

In his hands he carried his rifle and a lariat.

"Keep cool, Barney," he cried, as he came up. "Don't make a move till I tell you."

"All right, sor," cried Barney, readily. "Phwativer is it, sor?"

"Why, it is a prairie quicksand," replied Frank. "They are not uncommon hereabouts."

"Shure, I've no desire to go to the cinter av the airth."

"We won't let you," cried Frank. "Here, pass this under your arm."

Frank placed the rifle across the space of quicksand and Barney passed his arm over it.

This arrested the downward process and Barney was safe for the time.

But he was quite unable to extricate himself.

The question was, how to get him out of the clinging sands. But Frank Reade, Jr., knew how to do it.

He threw the noose of the lariat over Barney's shoulders. Then he said:

"Now hang on. We'll try and pull you out."

Frank and Pomp laid hold on the rope and exerted their full strength.

But they could hardly move the Celt. The sands were so mighty and clinging that their resistance could not be overcome with that amount of force.

"Golly, Marse Frank!" puffed Pomp, "I don't fink we're gwine fo' to git dat chile out ob dat place."

"Keep cool!" said Frank, quietly. "We will find a way."

Frank went back and brought the Steam Horse up.

He fastened one end of the lariat to the rear axle of the wagon.

Then he started the Horse slowly.

The result was that Barney suddenly began to emerge from his imprisonment in the sand.

Slowly but surely he was dragged from his uncomfortable position. Clear of the clinging sands Frank stopped the Steam Horse.

Then Barney scrambled to his feet.

He glanced at the treacherous spot from which he had just emerged and then at his bedraggled person.

"Begorra, naygur, I think we'd better call accounts square!" he cried. "Shure it's meself as has the divils ind av the bargain this toime."

"A'right, 'Tish, I'll fo'gib yo' dis time if yo' don't try any sich fmg on me agin," replied Pomp.

"I'll agree wid yez!"

And this ended the affair.

Camp was made by the saline lake that night, however.

Darkness settled down thickly and to enliven the dullness of the hour, Pomp brought out his banjo and Barney his fiddle.

They played very well together, and as the melodies from the two instruments floated forth upon the air, it did much to dispel the natural feeling of desolation peculiar to the region.

Frank Reade, Jr., thus far had not dreamed of danger.

Nothing had been seen to warrant the assumption that there was another human being within fifty miles.

Some hungry coyotes came snapping and snarling about the wagon.

Barney put one of them out of the way with his revolver and this for a time silenced the rest.

But as the hour of midnight drew nearer Frank began to think of sleep.

He had hardly stretched himself out upon the bunk, however, when a startling thing occurred.

Suddenly Barney dropped his fiddle and sprang up.

"Be me sowl, the divils are all about us!" he roared. "Shure, ye kin see their forms iverywhere!"

At the same moment a flight of arrows came rattling against the metal body of the wagon.

In an instant Frank was upon his feet. The gloom was broken with the headlight of the Steam Horse now, and the foe could be plainly seen.

It was a critical moment.

CHAPTER III.

CORALLED.

FRANK knew at once that they had been discovered by a band of Comanches.

The savages had crept up in the darkness and had for a time been puzzled at the make-up of the Steam Horse.

This had delayed their attack.

But it came, nevertheless, and in a furious manner.

The arrows began to fly in literal clouds. There was great danger of getting struck, as Frank well knew.

The young inventor quickly pressed the spring which shut the metal sides the wagon.

They were now perfectly secure from the arrows.

But there was an amount of danger in a close combat which Frank did not relish.

Accordingly he decided to make a move from the spot.

There was sufficient steam up to give the Horse fair speed.

Frank pulled on the reins and sent the Steam Horse forward.

Barney and Pomp went to the loopholes and opened fire upon the red foe.

Of course it was firing at random in the intense darkness.

The headlight of the Horse lit up for a ways in advance. But the red foe were swarming all about.

The din was something terrific as the red foe kept up a perpetual yelling and howling.

"Bejabers, I niver kin git a fair shot at the omadhauns," cried Barney, "they do be dodging about so much like the devil, shure one kin niver tell which way to fire."

"Jes' yo' fire anywheres—jes' de same as I does!" cried Pomp.

"Yo's dead suah for to hit some on 'em."

"Begorra, that's phwat I'm after doing," cried the Celt.

But Frank was anxious to get away from the foe.

Of course they had the best of the running fight, but it was impossible to tell just where the course they were pursuing would take them to. In the intense darkness they might at any moment run into some quicksand or saline lake.

Frank endeavored to keep the Steam Horse up to a good rate of speed.

He hung to the brake handle and kept a keen watch ahead, as far as he could see in the radius of light from the headlight of the Steam Horse.

For what seemed an interminable length of time this sort of thing went on.

Then it came to a sudden termination.

Of a sudden the whooping and yelling ceased, and the savages disappeared.

Nothing more was seen or heard of them for a time.

Frank was not a little surprised and puzzled.

"I wonder what game they are up to now?" he muttered. "I think we will keep a sharp look out."

He was not deceived.

He did not by any means credit the assumption that the savages had given up the contest.

This was not a reasonable hypothesis.

"Begorra, mebbe we're comin' to some hole in the ground, or something av the sort!" cried Barney, suspiciously.

"It will do no harm to keep a good watch anyway," rejoined Frank.

And this was done.

The Steam Horse now went on at a moderate pace, and Frank increased, if anything, his watchfulness.

The Comanches did not show up, and seemed to have wholly abandoned the fight.

Time wore on, and it was near dawn when through the shadows Barney saw a dark object which caused a sharp cry to escape his lips.

"Luk out, Misther Frank!" he cried. "Shure wud yez see phwat is ahead."

Frank's gaze was blinded by the headlight's glare for a moment.

But he closed the throttle and brought the Horse to a stop.

He was not a moment too soon.

They were at the base of a high cliff of rock which towered above fully a thousand feet.

If Barney had not seen the cliff just in time they would certainly have dashed full into the cliff.

This no doubt would have damaged the Steam Horse greatly if not destroyed it entirely.

"A lucky escape!" cried Frank, "but where in the world are we, Barney? I saw nothing of any elevation when we camped last night."

"Shure, sor, we've cum a good ways," declared Barney.

"We must have. Is this the base of some high hill, or—"

"Shure it's in a canyon I think we are, sor!" cried Barney. "Don't yez see that there be walls all about av us?"

"You're right!" cried Frank, as the rapidly growing dawn began to make the vicinity clear.

Then the voyagers were treated to a genuine surprise party as the vicinity became quite plain.

They were in what seemed like a mighty amphitheater fully two miles in circumference, hemmed in with precipitous cliffs in almost a complete circle.

Where the circle was broken was visible the entrance to this peculiar amphitheater.

Through this, by a singular chance, the Steam Horse had entered.

Frank understood the situation at a glance.

"Upon my word!" exclaimed the young inventor in amazement and trepidation, "we've stumbled into a nice trap now, haven't we?"

"Begorra, I should say so!" ejaculated Barney, with a grimace of comical sort.

"I done fink dat am a fac'," assented Pomp, seriously.

"I wonder if those savages did not know it and hung back on purpose?"

A chilling thought struck Frank.

Indeed it was not impossible but that they were even now in waiting at the narrow entrance to the place.

If so it would be a nice little ambush for the Steam Horse to fall into.

One thing was sure.

The best thing to be done was to get out of that spot just as soon as possible.

Accordingly Frank at once headed the Horse for the exit.

But as they drew near to the narrow passage, Frank found his worst fears confirmed.

He stopped the Horse.

"It's just as I thought," he muttered. "We're in a trap."

Fully a hundred hostile Comanches were blocking the entrance to the amphitheater, if such it could be called, with stones.

For the Steam Horse to pass over the barricade was utterly impossible.

They were hemmed in—trapped!

It was a thrilling realization.

For a moment all three stood looking at each other in blank amazement and indecision.

"Bejabers, it's a foine thrick they have played on us this toime!" cried Barney.

"Golly! I specs dem Injuns knowed all de time we'd be suah fo' to come in dis place," exclaimed Pomp.

"Well, we will have to fight our way out," said Frank, desperately.

Then a happy thought seemed to strike him.

But first let us see if there is not some other method of leaving the place," he cried.

"Bejabers, I don't think that," cried Barney, looking doubtfully at the high surrounding cliffs.

"Perhaps not!"

However, Frank turned the Horse about and began to make a circle of the enclosure.

But everywhere the cliffs seemed to present the same impregnable face.

There did not seem a crevice anywhere by which one could have hoped to crawl out of the place.

It was a hopeless outlook.

There seemed no other way but to fight a way out through the pass.

This would not have looked so hopeless had it not been for the obstructions in the shape of the heavy stones.

The Horse could not pass over these and to remove them the voyagers would have had to alight from the wagon and thus expose themselves.

But Frank started the Horse boldly for the pass.

The savages had intrenched themselves behind the barricade and were ready to receive the attack.

A flight of arrows came hurtling through the air.

These did no harm falling lightly against the steel shutters.

But part of the Comanches had fire arms and these now began to open fire upon the Steam Horse.

Frank sent the Horse up to within a safe distance of the barricade.

Then Barney and Pomp opened fire with their Winchesters.

Whenever they were able to draw a bead upon any of the red foe they could make their shots tell.

But this it was not so easy to do, for the Comanches kept well under cover of the rocks.

Every subterfuge was made to draw them out into the open.

While the Comanches defended the pass they did not attempt to make an attack upon the Steam Horse.

Their purpose seemed solely and simply to be to hold the pass and prevent the escape of the captives.

"Their game evidently is that of a long siege!" declared Frank positively. "It will be a hard outlook for us, for I see no other way to get out of this place."

Barney scratched his head vigorously and sat down to think a moment.

"Be jabbers, we can't fly out," he declared finally.

"No," replied Frank.

"Shure its stuck we are."

"To a certainty."

"What the devil will we do?"

"That's the question."

Irish wit, however, was not to be long baffled. Barney suddenly cried:

"Sure I have an idee."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank. "What is it?"

"Begorra, wud yez luk up yonder to the top av that cliff?"

Frank did look up.

This was to the top of the high walls of the pass.

"Well," he said curtly, "what are you driving at, Barney?"

"Shure, sor, if yez will give me the lave, I'll climb up there an' roll down big stones on the head av the rascals an' fire many a good shot at thim, too. Av I don't make it too hot for thim to sthay in the pass then me name ain' O'Shea."

A glad cry burst from Frank's lips.

He saw the feasibility of the plan at once.

"Good for you, Barney!" he cried. "It takes an Irishman to solve a riddle after all. You are a brick!"

"Shure I'm not a Mick, sor, savin' yer presence!" protested Barney.

"I said a brick. Not a Mick!"

"Shure I beg yare pardon, Misther Frank. It's a gintleman yez are, an' so was yer fayther afore ye."

But Frank was now busy figuring the chances of success of the new plan.

CHAPTER IV

DEFEATING THE COMANCHES.

It certainly was not a bad plan of Barney's, and one easily worked. It was a simple enough matter to climb to the top of the cliff.

Barney was all ready for the feat.

"Shure, I think yez had bether dhrup me over yinder in the edge av the mountain side," he said. "I don't think the omadhouns can see me there."

"You are right, Barney," agreed Frank; "that is a very good place."

The Steam Horse was accordingly sent over quickly to the spot named.

Here it was possible for Barney to leave the wagon without being seen by the red foe.

He at once struck out up the mountain side.

He carried two repeating rifles and plenty of ammunition. It was certain that a surprise party was in store for the Comanches.

Barney was quickly out of sight.

Frank muttered a fervent prayer for his success.

Then he turned the Horse back to the pass, and began firing again upon the foe.

Frank pushed forward into the pass as far as he dared.

Time passed rapidly.

An hour quickly fled by and the two men in the wagon were getting impatient, when suddenly Pomp sprang up.

"Look up dar, Marse Frank!" he cried. "See dat?"

He pointed far up to the top of the cliff. A puff of smoke lingered in the air, and the distant muffled report of a rifle was heard.

Barney had begun work.

The rifle shots became rapid and the effect upon the savages in the pass was terrific.

Loud yells of discomfiture and rage filled the air.

Of course, Barney from his position could look right down upon them and pick them off skillfully.

One by one he began to pick off the secreted redskins.

For a while they stood their ground.

It was useless to attempt to reply to the shots as Barney was entirely out of range or sight.

But the deadly bullets came down in their midst, and every one fired took a savage off the muster roll.

The Comanches hated to relinquish their position in the pass.

On the other hand, they could not afford to remain in their present position and be exterminated one by one.

There was no other way but to beat a retreat.

There was no way to send a party up to disperse the foe at once. It would require too much time.

So with baffled yells the Indians retreated from the pass.

It was now Frank and Pomp's turn to act.

Leaving the Steam Horse they began work immediately on the barricade of stones.

Hastily they worked at the herculean task of moving them.

Gradually they made a passage through the obstruction for the Steam Horse.

Soon Frank was enabled to get aboard and drive the Horse through. Then a signal was given Barney.

The Celt ceased firing and came down with all haste from his aerial perch.

He came down in half the time that he had occupied in going up, and in the meanwhile Frank and Pomp held the Comanches at bay.

"Begorra, didn't I give thim a foine taste av the law!" cried Barney, as he came tumbling aboard the wagon. "Shure I think they'll not thry that thrick again roight away."

"I am of the same opinion, Barney," cried Frank, with a laugh. "It was quite a surprise for them."

"Bedad, an' it was."

"We's jes' pulled out ob dat trap in good shape!" cried Pomp. "Yo' am got a big head, I ish."

"Shure ye're roight, naygur, but it's not so hard as yures."

"If it ain't I am jes' as thick yo' bet," retorted Pomp.

"We're out of the trap!" agreed Frank. "But not out of danger. We will have some fun with the Comanches now."

Frank sent the Steam Horse ahead at a full gallop.

The Comanches were smarting with defeat and desperate, and did not hesitate to make an attack.

Riding their ponies like fiends they charged upon the Steam Horse.

Luckless barbarians! they little weighed the result or anticipated the consequences.

Nothing could have pleased Frank Reade, Jr., more than this.

He did not attempt to stand his ground.

He adopted his old tactics of running away from the foe and defeating them while in pursuit.

The Comanches came after the Steam Horse like a whirlwind.

Barney and Pomp, at the rear loopholes, worked the repeaters and dropped the foe at every shot.

Frank kept the Steam Horse at an easy distance from the savages and held them there.

It was folly for the savages to try to outfoot the Steam Horse, as they speedily found out.

They were soon willing to abandon the pursuit and the battle, and rode away to the southward much discomfited.

Now that the affray was over, our adventurers were given an opportunity to look about and see where they were.

Looking to the westward, the mighty depression or sink, known as the Great Basin, could be seen sloping downward.

To the southward was the range of hills which formed the curious inclosed valley.

These hills were of fantastic shapes, and the vegetation was of a stunted and unprolific kind.

It was easy to realize that they were really in the great American desert. To the northward lay the mighty sandy waste which is fitly called the American Sahara.

Many a traveling party of explorers or prospectors had drifted out upon that arid waste and succumbed.

Even as caravans had perished in the great Sahara so had the American desert claimed its victims.

All gazed upon the scene spread before them with a profound impression of the importance of this fact.

Frank Reade, Jr., did not fear the desert with the Steam Horse, for he felt that at full speed he could quickly cross it.

Yet he gazed upon the sandy waste with deep interest.

The Comanches had gone from sight beyond the horizon long since.

"Well," said Frank, drawing a deep breath, "here we are in the desert, and it is somewhere in this region that Bert Mason is located. I would like to know just where."

"Begorra, it can't be out yonder in that pile av sand, Misther Frank," said Barney.

"No, Barney!" agreed Frank. "It probably is not there."

"I jes' tole yo' dat if dar am any livin' man in dis yer paht ob de worl' he am ober yonder ways," declared Pomp.

The darky pointed to a distant range of hills, to the southward of the depression of the Great Basin.

"I believe you're right, Pomp," agreed Frank. "We will go thither."

Accordingly the Steam Horse was turned in that direction.

Across the plain they ran quickly.

As they drew nearer the hills, a long stretch of barren country was seen reaching to the southwest.

The sun's hot rays glistened across it with dazzling radiance.

The earth seemed baked to the hardness of brick, and great waves of heat could be seen with the naked eyes emanating from it.

Across this dreary sun-burned waste a horseman was making his way at a slow canter.

At sight of him Frank closed the throttle and brought the Steam Horse to a halt.

"Where is my long distance glass?" he asked Barney.

The Celt produced it quickly.

Frank brought it to bear upon the distant rider.

For a moment he scrutinized him closely. Barney and Pomp were eagerly waiting the decision.

"Shure, an' phwat do yez make av him, Misther Frank?" asked Barney.

"Well, he is a strange-looking character," replied Frank, "but he is certainly a white man."

"Golly! dat am joyful news?" cried Pomp. "It will seem jes glad fo' to see a white man once moh."

"Or a black man, either!" grinned Barney.

Pomp did not notice this insinuation but continued:

"P'raps it am dat bery chap youse lookin' fo', Marse Frank."

"We'll soon find out!" declared the young inventor, calmly.

Frank opened the throttle and started the Steam Horse ahead.

The distant rider evidently had not seen the Steam Horse, for he had been riding with his head bowed down.

When he did lift his gaze and saw the strange invention coming toward him, the effect was surprising.

He pulled his pony up short and sat for a moment in the saddle like a veritable statue.

Then he seemed imbued with an impulse to flee.

But Frank saw this in time and brought the Horse to a stop.

The young inventor alighted from the wagon and waved his arms in a reassuring manner.

The traveler, who was a man of singular garb and appearance, remained and answered the signal.

Frank boldly advanced on foot toward this singular nomad of the plains, for such the rider appeared to be.

He was a tall, powerful-framed, coarse-featured man of forty-five years of age.

His hair hung in long, matted folds down upon his back from beneath a clumsy bearskin cap.

A tremendous patriarchal-like beard covered his chest; keen black eyes looked out from shaggy brows. Such was his face and form.

His garb was of a nondescript kind, and wholly the product of trapper life.

Greasy buckskin leggings and moccasins inclosed legs and feet, a red shirt, dirty and patched, was worn beneath an outer jacket of tanned deer hide, fringed with porcupine quills.

The unknown carried a rifle and revolvers and knife, and rode in an Indian saddle; with a curious bridle of plaited rawhide to decorate the pony with.

Such types were rarely met with in that part of the West, and Frank knew it.

This man, he instantly reflected, was far from his usual haunts.

He was a trapper from the wilds of Montana, and made his living in dealing in traps and furs.

What he was doing in this part of the world was a problem.

However, Frank advanced boldly toward him.

When within safe speaking distance, the young inventor asked:

"Good-day to you, stranger. Where are you traveling?"

CHAPTER V.

BEAVER BILL'S INFORMATION.

The trapper dismounted and advanced in his turn.

His broad face wore a genial expression, and there was a trusting light in his fine blue eyes.

"Wall, stranger, since ye ask, I'll make free to say thet I am goin' back to ther old trappin' grounds up north."

"Ah!" exclaimed Frank, "then you are a trapper?"

"That's the size of it."

"I am glad to meet you!"

"Put it thar, pilgrim!"

"My name is Frank Reade, Jr. I am from the far East."

"Wall, my name is Bill Swazey. Beaver Bill they call me up in ther Powden river kentry an' I'm a trapper."

"If that is so, what are you doing away down here?" asked Frank, in amazement.

"Eh?" exclaimed the trapper, with a start. "Ye don't seem to onderstand. This is the trapper's highway along yer. Thar's fully a hundred of us goes up an' down over this trail in the seasons. When trapping season is ended we generally all pilgrimate to Arizony or some warmer locality. Then we go back when fur is in season agin. See?"

"I do," replied Frank, with asperity. "You go to the miserable settlements to spend the money you have earned so hard by trapping."

"Wall," rejoined the trapper, in a somewhat resentful tone, "it's honestly earned, and we kin do as we please."

"Oh, of course," said Frank, quickly. "Well, friend, I am glad to have met you."

"Ther same, pard. But what in tarnation do ye call that 'ere thingem-a-jig out yender on ther perairy?"

"That is the Steam Horse," replied Frank readily.

"A Steam Hoss!" gasped Old Bill. "Ye don't mean to say that thing is alive?"

"Oh, no! It goes by steam."

"By steam?"

"Certainly."

The trapper scratched his head and looked perplexed.

"Mebbe I'm a sucker an' a greenhorn," he said, "but I reckon that runs jest ther way a puffin' lokermotive does?"

"Exactly," replied Frank.

"Umph!" grunted the trapper. "'Pears to me, I hev heerd of the iron hoss. But I s'pose it had to go on rails."

"By no means!" replied Frank, "the Steam Horse needs no rails to travel on."

"Do tell? Kin he go fast?"

"Almost a mile a minute!"

"Whew!"

The old trapper seemed overcome. He drew his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his steaming brow.

"Wall, I never!" he muttered. "What will the world come to next I wonder. I say, stranger, I'd like to take a peep at that masheen."

"Certainly!" replied Frank. "Come along with me and I'll make you acquainted with my traveling companions."

The trapper left his pony and shuffled up to the Steam Horse.

He surveyed the invention and listened to Frank's dissertation with blank amazement.

"Wall, I swar!" he muttered, "I never heard tell of sich a thing. It's a wonderful masheen no doubt."

Then he turned about and bent a keen penetrating gaze upon Frank.

"Stranger, wud ye mind tellin' me what ye're in this part of the kentry arter anyway?"

"Certainly!" replied Frank.

"What might it be?"

"We are looking for evidence to clear an innocent man now languishing in prison of the charge of murder."

Beaver Bill gave a violent start and drew a deep, long whistle."

"Ye don't mean it, stranger?" he gasped.

"Yes I do!" replied Frank. "The real murderer is at large and I am searching for him."

"Sho! What war the murder?"

Frank explained matters.

When he told of the strange tragedy which had overtaken Clem Johnson, the trapper gave a start.

"I heern tell of that!" he cried. "I onct knew Clem. So it's Bert Mason ye're lookin' fer, eh?"

"Yes."

"Wall, that's strange."

"Do you know him?" asked Frank eagerly.

"Wall, I should say so!"

"Where is he now?" asked the young inventor excitedly.

"Wall, that's not so easy to say," replied the trapper, with a drawl. "I 'low he was at Lone Trail when I wuz down thar this winter."

"Can you swear to that?"

Beaver Bill looked surprised.

"In course I kin."

"Then you are just the man I want. If you will go to Silver City and swear to that you will save Benjamin Astley from the scaffold."

But the trapper said coolly:

"Hold on a bit, stranger. Thar's a better way. They mought not take my word. Ye want to find Bert Mason an' perduce him in court."

Frank saw that this was true.

"You're right!" he cried, earnestly; "but tell me where you think Mason is?"

The trapper indulged in a big chew of plug tobacco.

"Wall," he said, slowly. "I 'low that he's somewhere hereabouts."

Frank gave a gasping cry.

"You don't mean it!" he cried.

"Yas, I do, stranger," replied the trapper. "I heern it said that at Lone Tree that him an' a dozen others had come up inter ther Great Basin prospecting for gold."

"Ah, and that is why you believe that he is near here?"

"Sartin!"

"But you don't know the exact locality where he is?"

The trapper was thoughtful.

"Wall," he muttered after a time. "I reckon you've heard of Satan's Hole?"

"No," replied Frank.

"Sho! Wall there is where he an' his party likely is."

"What sort of a place is it?"

Beaver Bill shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't imagine him nor his pals are in ther hole," he said "for no man kin live thar any great length of time. But it was said that thar was a big gold mine jest at ther entrance to Satan's Hole."

This account was extremely interesting to Frank.

"Go on!" he said.

"Wall, Satan's Hole is a terrible place. It's a deep valley two miles long and hemmed all in by high walls of rock."

"In ther centre of that valley thar's nuggets mixed with the sand, pure gold, and lots go into the valley but never come out. Ther gold tempts 'em."

"What is the trouble?" asked Frank. "Why cannot a man live in the valley?"

"Ugh!" grunted the trapper, "thar's a powerful reason why. Satan's Hole is as hot as Hades, an' thar's powerful gases come up out of the ground an' overcomes one. Thar's a trail across that valley strewn with corpses, an' it is called the Sandy Trail of Death."

"You mean skeletons?" corrected Frank, "not bodies."

"I axe your parding boss, but it are bodies, not skelingtons. Thar's something about the atmosphere ov the gases, that preserves ther human body, an' there are bodies of men who went inter ther place twenty years ago, as natural as life."

Frank was astonished at this marvelous tale, the like of which he had never heard before.

"Wonderful," he exclaimed. "Why is it that the scientific world has not heard of this strange valley?"

The trapper smiled.

"Thar's a powerful good reason," he declared. "Ten years ago a party of them chaps cum out hyar. They knew it all, an' they wouldn't heed anybody's warning. They went inter the valley an' half way across the gas caught 'em."

"Horrible!"

"An' thar they air to-day."

Frank experienced a chill.

"That is a horrible thing," he declared. "I suppose unsuspecting travelers are apt to walk right into the place?"

"Certain. I know of at least three men who hev crossed ther valley safely."

"How did they do it?"

"Oh, thar's days when ther gases don't come up, I suppose."

Frank was thoughtful a moment.

Barney and Pomp had been listening with the deepest of interest.

"How far is it from here to the Satan's Hole?" Frank finally asked.

"Oh, a matter of fifty miles I reckon," replied Beaver Bill.

He pointed to the westward.

"Right down yonder inter the Great Basin," he continued, "powerful curus country down there. Don't do to travel far on any of their rivers, for they mought switch ye under ground any minnit."

"Yes," replied Frank. "I am aware that most of the rivers in the Great Basin run underground."

"I reckon so, stranger."

"Golly, Marse Frank!" cried Pomp, "don' yo' s'pose dis gentleman would go wif us an' show us de way?"

The same thought had struck Frank.

He turned inquiringly to the trapper. The latter wore an inscrutable expression upon his grizzled face.

"Wall, I don't mind givin' ye a lift on it, friends," he said, cheerily.

"I will pay you well," declared Frank.

"Don't want no pay!" exclaimed the trapper, indignantly. "I ain't that kind of a chap yew kin bet."

"At least we shall be everlastingly in your debt," insisted Frank.

"No, ye won't, nuther. I'm glad to be able to help ye out. Moreover, I've got a bit of a grudge against Mason myself, an' I'd like ter see him suffer."

"Then it is agreed!" cried Frank.

"Thar's my word on't."

"But what will you do with your pony?"

"He'll trail on all right enuff."

"All right. Get right into the wagon."

Beaver Bill climbed into the wagon and Frank went to the dasher.

"How many men do you think Mason has with him?" he asked.

"He mought have a dozen."

"What is their game?"

"I heard that they watch for a chance ter cross ther Death Valley, and pick up nuggets, but I reckon there's sumthin' else keeps 'em busy thar."

The old trapper winked significantly.

"Eh?" said Frank, failing to understand.

"Don't ye embrace the idee?"

"No."

"It means that they're in the reproducin' business, that is ther mannyfactor of bad coin."

Frank gave a gasping cry.

"Counterfeiting?"

"Yes."

"Well, I never! Are you quite sure of that, Bill?"

The trapper inclined his head.

"Yew bet I am!" he declared. "Thar's lots of ther stuff goes down towards Lone Tree, and over inter Mexico. It's a purty good imitation, too! They do say that Mason has a die for throwing out silver dollars by ther thousand."

Frank Reade, Jr., was quite overcome by this announcement. It was entirely unexpected.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MEXICAN RIDER.

THIS was something utterly foreign to Frank's expectation.

To run upon a gang of counterfeiters in this out of the way part of the world was certainly a surprise party.

But the young inventor had learned to take the unexpected with other things in a philosophical manner.

Certainly there could have been no safer part of the world than this for the manufacture of counterfeit coin.

It was easy to evade the officers of the law, and also easy to secrete any quantity of the bogus stuff where it could not be located.

The Steam Horse went ahead at quite a rapid gait.

Beaver Bill's pony followed on behind at a rapid gallop.

The trained animal would at intervals lift its head and neigh shrilly.

"I tell ye, I'm proud of that leetle boss," declared the trapper.

"He mayn't be able to jog quite so fast as yer Steam Hoss, but he knows a heap an' I kin tell yer he's bin in many a hot scrimmage with me an' many a time but fer the leetle chap I'd never hev got through."

"Indeed!" said Frank. "I should think you would be much attached to him."

"You bet I am, stranger."

The face of the country here had the happy virtue of being level, though bare and arid.

There were vast tracts of red clay burned beneath the sun's rays as hard as adamant.

Then sandy plains were crossed and alkali basins.

At times gnarled pillars of coagulated rock were encountered, making a rival of the Bad Lands.

This showed unmistakably the action of the glacial period. Many strange and wonderful freaks of nature were encountered.

But after a time a long, high-capped range of hills began to show up to the westward.

Suddenly Beaver Bill sprang up and pointed to the hills, shouting: "Thar, friends, do yer see that break in ther range, a kind of a gateway like?"

It required but a glance to see a deep notch in the range of the hills.

It was indeed like a gateway through the mountain wall.

The sky beyond looked peculiar and hazy in its depths.

"Is that—?" began Frank.

"Yas," interrupted Bill, "thet's ther entrance to Satan's Hole."

"But it looks as if there was open country beyond," declared Frank.

The trapper shook his head slowly.

"That ain't so!" he declared. "Ye'll find that ye're in a level valley with hills all around ye when ye get in there."

Frank gazed long and critically at the point in question.

"And you say that Mason and his gang are located there?"

"The best I kin make out."

"All right," declared Frank. "We'll soon find out what kind of a place it is."

The Steam Horse now was sent forward rapidly.

Beaver Bill's pony seemed to be getting exhausted.

It was now a question as to what to do. But the trapper solved the question.

"I'll tell ye what to do," he declared. "Ye know the way to Satan's Hole now. Ye kin let me out yer an' I'll rest my pony up and be along up ter-morrer."

"Very well," agreed Frank. "We shall look for you to-morrow."

"Yas."

The Steam Horse was brought to a stop and Beaver Bill left the wagon.

He proceeded to loosen the saddle from his pony's back and give him freedom.

Fortunately there was a brief space of green grass here, and the little animal was enabled to get a bite.

The Steam Horse went on to the entrance of Death Valley.

Soon a plateau was encountered and crossed, then a plain beyond it, and then the travelers saw the pass before them.

Upon either hand rose mighty walls of rock.

It was like the veritable gateway to a Hades, and in spite of themselves all experienced a queer chill.

But Frank kept on until the Steam Horse was fairly in the pass.

The floor of the pass was of smooth rock as level as a floor.

Beyond, now the treacherous valley was revealed as plain as could be.

It looked like an ordinary sandy desert plain.

That was all.

The uninitiated would never have suspected its treacherous character.

"Golly!" cried Pomp, in surprise. "It don' look no diffrunt from any oder valley, Marse Frank."

"That's so," agreed Frank. "Neither do I see any signs of human life hereabouts."

The young inventor was thinking of Mason and his gang.

But Barney had begun to sniff the air, and said:

"Bejabers, it's a devil av a funny smell loike in the air."

Both Pomp and Frank now realized this.

It seemed like sulphuretted hydrogen, and thoroughly impregnated the atmosphere. Also, with close scrutiny, they could now see unmistakably the sandy trail of death.

There it led across the desert waste, and objects in the sand might be the victims of the death trail. These were certainly plainly visible.

The adventurers gazed upon the scene with peculiar sensations.

Then a blast of air came out from the valley.

It was a peculiar, withering heat, and caused all to gasp for air.

"It is right!" cried Frank; "this is certainly the Valley of Death."

"Begorra, I believe yez!" cried Barney. "Shure, it luks enough loike it."

"Golly! I jes' reckons nuffin' wud lib in dar," agreed Pomp.

This was plain to see.

Not a tree or shrub or flowering plant or blade of grass relieved the arid wastes of the Death Valley.

It was a ghostly, forbidding sight.

Even at that distance with a glass Frank was enabled to see the forms of the victims of the gases strewn along the sandy trail of death. For a time the travelers gazed upon the scene.

Then Frank aroused himself.

"This will never do!" he cried. "We are losing time here."

"Dat am a fac', Marse Frank," cried Pomp.

"Begorra, yez won't go ahead will yez?" asked Barney.

"I don't think we will follow the sandy trail of death," replied Frank. "But I would like to know where Mason's den is."

At this moment a sudden startling sound smote upon the ears of all.

The evening air was very still and calm and sound traveled a good ways.

It was plainly enough the distant beat of horses' hoofs.

It seemed to come from a point above, and now Frank saw a broad trail winding to the right up the side of the pass.

At the same moment the hoof strokes became plainer and then into sight rode a man of peculiar appearance.

He was tall and dark and wore a gay Mexican suit of silk and velvet with glittering patent leather boots.

He was armed to the teeth and rode a large dark colored horse bedecked with gay trappings.

The animal had been trotting down the trail, but now came to an instant halt pulled upon his haunches by the rider.

It was as if some gay Mexican cavalier had burst upon the scene fresh from sunny Mexico.

The rider sat for a moment like a statue, utterly dumfounded at sight of the Steam Horse.

If his appearance had been a surprise to Frank and the others, the sight of the Steam Horse was a revelation to the unknown.

"*Perdido!*" he gasped, in a thrilled voice. "Am I dreaming? Is it the devil? St. Michael forbid!"

Frank heard his startled words, and at once showed himself at the dasher of the wagon.

"No, it is not the devil," he replied, "it is the invention of a human being."

The Mexican was unable to reply for a moment.

Finally, however, he doffed his sombrero with great gravity and replied;

"Buenos, senior! You have the advantage—I have never seen you before. I am Jose Costello!"

"And I am Frank Reade, Jr.," replied Frank. "I come from the East."

"And I am from Mexico, senior," replied the Mexican, politely.

"I am pleased to greet you."

"The same," replied Frank.

"But senior will pardon me. I have never seen a horse made of iron before."

"You have seen locomotives?"

"Ah, that I have. They are plenty now in Mexico."

"Well, this is built on the same principle, only in the shape of a horse and designed to go without rails."

"Si, senior, now I see!" cried the Mexican, spurring his horse nearer; "but it is a wonderful thing."

"Everybody thinks so!" said Frank, modestly.

"Yet it would be as naught and the seniors as well should you enter yonder valley."

"Ah," said Frank, "then that is really the death valley?"

"Si, senior!"

"A terrible place!"

"Indeed. Many worthy people have lost their lives in that death trap."

"There should be a notice warning people of the danger."

"The senior is right!"

Castello had now reined his horse up quite near to the wagon.

Frank who was a keen student of human nature was doing his best to size the fellow up.

As far as he could see, he was a gay type of the Mexican sport, fond of cards and wine and women.

He did not seem to be a rascal or a cut-throat in any sense of the term.

But what was he doing in this part of the country?

A sudden thought came to Frank.

He might be, like others, a customer of Mason's, and have come here for a supply of counterfeit money with which to return to Mexico and defraud his countrymen.

The more Frank weighed this matter, the better satisfied he was of the truth.

But yet he was desirous of making sure of the fact.

How to do this without arousing suspicion was a question.

But the Mexican's curiosity seemed also to have been aroused, and he asked, in a guarded way:

"Has senior traveled far?"

Frank embraced the opportunity.

"We have traveled from the East," he replied. "And we have come here to find a certain person, whom you may know."

CHAPTER VII.

THE PARLEY.

CASTRELLO gave a violent start.

Frank's declaration was a genuine surprise to him.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "You have me by surprise, senior."

"Do I?"

"I cannot conceive who the person is to whom senior refers."

"Ah, do you not know anybody in this locality?"

The Mexican hesitated.

"Is the senior hunting for wealth?"

"Perhaps so," replied Frank. "At least I have been led to believe that I could find that which would give me wealth here."

A light overspread Castello's face.

"You have come right!" he cried. "Senior Mason will give you what you want."

Frank knew at once that he had gained his point.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, coolly, "then you believe that?"

"I know it."

"How can I find Mason?"

"That trail will lead to his home."

"Ah! but I cannot hope to go up there with my Steam Horse."

"Not?"

"No! Would you mind doing me a favor? Kindly ride up and ask Mason to come down here."

The Mexican made a profound bow.

He laughed until one could see his white teeth beneath his dark mustache.

"Senior, I am glad to do your bidding!" he declared.

Then he touched the horse with the jangling spurs upon his heels, and the animal went out of sight in a twinkling in the narrow path.

Time passed slowly.

It seemed as if an hour passed, and Barney ventured to remark:

"Begorra, it's moighty quare where the black-eyed chap has gone away."

"I jes' flunks if he don' cum soon dat he ain' gwine to," declared Pomp.

"Well, it is a trifle odd," remarked Frank. "If he don't show up very soon we'll try to ascertain why."

Another half hour passed.

It was beginning to get quite dark in the gorge.

Still Senior Castello failed to put in an appearance.

Frank was now out of patience.

"Enough of this!" he said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "We have got to find a good camping place."

"Be jabbers that fellow was a fraud!" declared Barney. "Yez kin be sure av that, Misther Frank."

"I believe you are right, Barney. Well, we will find a good place to lay up until daybreak and then we will investigate."

"Is it out av the canyon ye'd be after goin', Misther Frank?"

"Yes."

"All roight, sor!"

Barney started the Steam Horse out of the gorge.

But now a genuine surprise awaited the party. Turning a short corner in the pass Barney pulled the Horse up.

"Whurroo!" he yelled. "Wud yez look at that, Misther Frank!"

In the pass not one hundred yards ahead drawn up in solid line and armed to the teeth was a line of men.

Back of them two men were seen on horseback. That one of them was the Mexican, Castello, Frank saw at once.

It was a shrewd game that the fellow had played.

Of course he was in the game with Mason and in league with the counterfeiters.

Frank regarded the line of armed men and smiled.

They evidently thought to check the Steam Horse with this display of strength. But Frank only smiled.

The Steam Horse was brought to a stop, though Frank now took the reins.

"Begorra, it's the devils av' counterfeiters thimselves, I take it," cried Barney.

"So it is," said Frank. "And they think they have got us in a trap."

The Celt roared.

"Be jabbers, we'll soon learn thim bethter than that," he cried.

"Luk out dar, Marse Frank," cried Pomp, "don' yo' see dat man wife de white flag!"

This was true.

One of the counterfeiters was advancing with a flag of truce. Frank at once opened the door of the wagon and stepped out into view.

The fellow advanced to within twenty yards of the Steam Horse and exclaimed:

"Hell, strangers!"

"Hello!" replied Frank.

"I reckon ye don't know where ye are, do ye?"

"We are in the Death Pass, are we not?" replied Frank.

"That's right! Wall, thar's only one man has any right to this pass, an' his name is Bert Mason."

"Indeed!"

"Ye sent word that ye wanted to see him. We've got information that you are a spy, and you'll have ter prove yerself, or ye can't go out of here alive."

"Who says I cannot?"

"Bert Mason."

"Who is he?"

"Why, he owns this pass."

"Oh, he does, eh?" said Frank, with sarcasm. "He is a fortunate man, isn't he? Suppose I do not prove myself?"

"Then ye can't go out of here alive"

"That is serious!"

"I reckon ye'll find it so."

"What will keep me from going out of here?"
 "I reckon thar's enough on us. We'll riddle that go-cart of yours with rifle balls."
 Frank laughed scornfully.
 "Fire away!" he cried. "I defy you!"
 "You do, eh?"
 "Yes."

"Shall I take that word back?"
 "Yes, if you want to; but stay."
 "Wall?"
 "Who is Bert Mason and what is his business? Can you tell me?"
 "Well, I reckon you know well enough," replied the truce bearer, curtly.

"You think so? Well, I think I do. You are all a pack of counterfeiters and rascals; but that's all right. I'll not trouble you if Mr. Bert Mason will do me a favor."

"What's that?"
 "Well, I will explain. Up in Silver City there is a poor chap named Benjamin Astley, who is under sentence of death. It is believed that he is identical with Bert Mason and that he is guilty of the murder of Clem Johnson. Now, if Bert Mason will do the right thing and clear that poor fellow, that is all that I will ask."

The truce bearer listened attentively to this statement. Then he laughed in a strange, hollow way.

"Wall, I'm sorry for that poor devil. I s'pose ye want Mason to go up there and give himself up?"

"I see no other or better way."
 "Wall, you will be a heap bigger fool than ye are now when he does."

"Ah! can you answer for him?"
 "You bet I can."
 "Perhaps you are Mason?"
 "That ain't here nor there. I don't keer to entertain any proposal of ther kind, an' we call upon you to surrender."

Frank had thus far pursued clever tactics in drawing the fellow out. He had gained much valuable information.

He realized, however, now that the crisis was at hand.

"What if I surrender?" he said, keenly. "What are your terms?"
 "Unconditional surrender."

"That means that you will cut my throat after being taken. Well, I think it will be just as well for me to fight. So I decline to surrender."

"Ye do, eh?"
 "Yes."

The fellow turned short about and marched back to the file of men. His message seemed to anger them, for a mad yell went up on the air.

Then the command was heard:
 "Give it to 'em, boys!"

The next moment the crash of fire-arms broke the air of the gorge. A volley of rifle balls came whistling up the defile.

But they rattled harmlessly against the steel shutters of the wagon. Frank and Barney and Pomp all sprang to the loopholes and opened fire upon the villains.

Volley after volley was fired at the Steam Horse by the counterfeiters.

But it did no damage whatever.
 On the other hand, Barney and Pomp picked off a number of the counterfeiters with deadly aim.

Indeed, given time, the little party of three could have cleaned out the whole gang.

It seemed that the counterfeiters had become aware of the fact that their shots had not told, for the order came for a charge.

Up the defile they came on a charge in headlong fashion.
 But Frank was ready for them.

He knew that it would never do to let the villains get hands upon the Horse or wagon.

To charge was the only method, so Frank opened the throttle wide and sent the Steam Horse ahead.

The horse went down into the midst of the yelling gang like a thunderbolt.

The effect was most dismaying to the outlaws.
 A path was literally mowed through their ranks. Their efforts to check the Horse were utterly futile.

Down through their midst the Steam Horse went, and clearing them, went on out of the gorge.

Frank let the Horse run for ten miles rapidly, until a good spot to camp was found.

Then he halted, and all sprang out. A fire was quickly built and the evening meal got under way.

"Begorra, I reckon we give them varmints a good lesson that toime!" cried Barney.

"I jes' flink dey won't fo'git dat fo' one while!" cried Pomp.

"It certainly taught them that the Steam Horse was no toy," declared Frank with a laugh.

Supper was quickly made and all partook of a hearty meal.

The shadows of night were settling down fast. They did not intend of course to sleep outside the wagon, and were about to climb into it when a startled cry went up from Barney.

"Be jabers, phwativer do yez call that?" he cried.

Through the gloom there suddenly appeared a dark object.

The next moment into the circle of firelight burst a horse and rider. The rider threw himself out of the saddle with a loud guffaw.

"Wall, I swan!" he cried. "If I ain't caught up with ye arter all."

It was Beaver Bill, the trapper.
 "Ha! glad to see you, Bill!" cried Frank, with pleasure.
 "Ther same, cap'er. I rested ther pony up, an' then cum along slow like. But we're yit ten miles from the valley."
 "Oh, yes. We've just come down from there."
 The old trapper looked astonished.

CHAPTER VIII.

RECONNOITERING.

"Jest cum from thar!" he cried. "Ye don't mean it?"
 "Yes, I do," replied Frank. "We have been up there and back."
 "What did you cum back fer?" asked the amazed trapper.
 "For the sake of safety."
 "Ah, then ye run afoul of the gang, did ye?"
 "We did."

With this Frank proceeded to give Beaver Bill an account in full of the incidents in Death Gorge.

The trapper listened with interest.
 "Good enough!" he cried. "I'm glad ye gave 'em a lesson. I reckon, if ye work it right, ye kin capture that rascal of a Mason."

"Have you any plan to suggest?" asked Frank.

The trapper was thoughtful for a moment. Then he peered into Frank's face.

"Be you a good scout?" he asked.
 "Do you mean in the bush?"

"Yas!"
 "Well, I know a little something about it," replied Frank.

"All right. I reckon ye'll do. Ter-night, if ye feel like it, we'll scout up that way an' try an' git inter Mason's den. Mebbe we could work a stratagem to git a hitch on him. See?"

"Good for you!" cried Frank. "I am with you in that game!"
 "Then ye'll risk it?"

"Anything."
 "But what'll ye do with yer iron hoss hyar?"

"Oh, Barney and Pomp will look after that all right," replied Frank. "When shall we start?"

"Not afore midnight, I reckon. P'raps yer hoss kin take us up quicker'n mine."

"Of course. Look here, Barney. You've heard all this?"
 "I have, sor!"

"Well, now, you and Pomp will understand what I expect of you until I return."

"To be shure, sor."

"I want you to keep out of the way of the foe. You know my signal whistle. When you hear it, answer."

"Shure I will that, sor!"
 So the plan was completed for the incursion into Death Pass by night.

It was somewhere before midnight, however, and our adventurers settled down for a quiet time until that hour should come.

Barney brought out his fiddle and Pomp the banjo.

They played lively tunes and sang to the keen enjoyment of the old trapper, Beaver Bill.

"Wall, by mighty!" roared the old woodsman, "that does jest take ther pancake. I never heern anythin' better nor that in me life."

"Did yez niver dance a jig?" cried Barney. "Shure, here's the jig the Kilkenny piper danced himself to death over."

With this, the Celt set up a rollicking air on the fiddle which was more meritorious in jingle than measure.

Beaver Bill could not stand.

"Well, me boys," he cried, shambling to his feet. "I used ter dance when I was young, me and Sal Hawkins onct took ther prize at a log cabin warmin'; hyar goes!"

The old trapper's lengthy, lank limbs began to flap about in keeping with the music.

It was a spectacle to have made a dog laugh.
 It is needless to say that at the conclusion of the dance there was not a dry eye in the camp.

Then Barney treated the audience to a genuine Irish jig.

Pomp was not to be outdone, and followed with a plantation breakdown. It was a feast for the gods!

Thus the hours passed rapidly, until suddenly consulting his watch, Frank found that it was midnight.

"Enough!" he cried, springing to his feet. "Time is up."
 "Shure, an' is it?" cried Barney, regretfully.

But business was business, and soon all were busy making ready for the expedition.

The Steam Horse was finally started for the Death Pass.

It was slow work picking the way along in the gloom.

But at length they arrived at a point within a mile of the spot.

Then Frank caused the Steam Horse to be drawn up in a dark corner of the mountain side.

"Now, Barney and Pomp," he cried, "don't forget my instructions."
 "Shure, we won't, sor."

"We'se jes' a' right, Marse Frank."

"T'at settles it," said Frank. "Come on, Mr. Beaver Bill."

Together they glided away into the intense darkness. They were off upon their daring errand.

The Rubicon was crossed. Only time would tell the results.
 The trapper led the way, gliding through the shadows as noiseless as a panther.
 Gradually they approached the Pass.

They had no doubt that sentries would be found posted in the vicinity, so it was necessary to proceed with the very greatest of care.

But as they crept on, to their relief and surprise they did not encounter anything of the kind.

The way seemed clear and they crept into the Pass like silent shadows.

Beaver Bill was an adept at this sort of thing.

But he speedily found that it was not foreign to Frank Reade, Jr. The young inventor was as silent and tactful as the trapper.

This seemed to reassure the latter. Suddenly Bill came to a halt. He made a funnel of his hands and whispered faintly in Frank's ear:

"Thar's nobody hereabouts, pard. What will ye do?"

Frank answered in the same manner:

"Let us try that path down which the greaser came this afternoon."

"Where is it?"

Then Frank remembered that the trapper had not been present at the time.

"All right," he returned, "I'll show you the way."

"Lead on!"

Frank now skillfully led the way across the pass.

So silently and effectively did he do it, in the intense gloom that it was clearly demonstrated to Beaver Bill that the young inventor knew his business well.

The trapper from that moment reposed full confidence in his companion.

Frank reached the path which led up the cliff.

Here he halted and listened.

It was some while before he was satisfied that the coast was clear.

Then he whispered:

"All right, Bill; come on."

The trapper followed without question.

Like silent phantoms they crept up the winding path. Up and up they went until they could overlook the Death Valley.

And there a curious spectacle was presented to their view.

In different quarters of the valley myriads of dancing balls of fire, ghastly in their radiance, seemed to spring from the soil, linger in the air a few moments, and then vanish.

It looked like a literal display of fireworks.

The two men gazed upon the spot wholly spell-bound. They had never seen anything like it before.

It was now easy to understand why wandering tribes of Indians and ignorant white men shunned the valley.

The sight was one well calculated to appeal to one's sense of superstition.

To the untutored savages or the white man unfamiliar with natural sciences, the exhibition certainly partook of the supernatural.

There were large areas wholly free from this peculiar display.

Bill Swazey the hunter was unable to understand the phenomenon.

"Great bars!" he gasped, "thar ain't much doubt about this place being ther abode of the devil is ther?"

"I think there is a good deal of doubt," replied Frank.

The trapper was astonished.

"Eh!" he rejoined. "Praps' ye kin account for thim devilish balls av fire."

"Of course I can."

"What mought they be?"

"It is a peculiar characteristic of that sort of gas, that it is visible to the eye at night in this form. You have heard of the light of the Jack-o'-lantern or will-o'-the-wisp?"

"Sartin."

"Well, this is explained in much the same manner. That is the outcome of swamp gas and practically harmless, but this gas undoubtedly has anaesthetic properties and swooms one to death, just as too much chloroform would."

The trapper listened respectfully, but the superstitious element was too deeply imbedded in his nature to allow of his accepting Frank's explanation at once.

"That sounds all right, pard," he declared, "but I'll be doggoned if I'd want to go down thar."

"To the contrary it is quite safe in my belief to go down thar at night."

The trapper gasped with amazement.

"Are ye mad, pard?"

"No. I am perfectly sane."

"Don't ye know thar's dozens of dead men out on that plain."

"I do know it!" replied Frank, "but I'll venture not one of them attempted to cross in the night."

"Eh, what diffrence mought it make whether day or night?"

"All the difference in the world. You will see that only certain localities in the valley throw up those balls of fire."

The trapper was interested.

"Yas!"

"You will see that there are other spaces wholly free from the display."

"I reckon so!"

"Well, where you see none of the lights, that space is free from the gas. It is only where you see the balls of fire that any of the deadly gas is to be found."

"Wall," said Bill, slowly, "what ar ye drivin' at?"

"I am trying to demonstrate my belief that at night a man can safely cross that valley by keeping out of the way of those balls of fire

which are a guide to one. Of course, in the daytime, one does not see the gas, and sooner or later must walk into it and be overcome."

The trapper was now deeply impressed with the logic of Frank's remarks.

He scratched his head thoughtfully.

"Wall, I swow!" he grunted. "Mebbe ye're right. I never cud study out any of them scientific matters anyway."

"I will take my oath that I am right," declared Frank, confidently.

"Indeed I am so sure of it that I am going down there and try the experiment."

The trapper placed a hand on Frank's arm.

"Fer God's sake, pard, don't venture inter that hole," he remonstrated. "It's sartin ter be death."

But Frank only laughed.

"You will see that I am right," he cried. "I will demonstrate that fact to you very quickly, my friend."

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE COUNTERFEITERS' DEN.

The declaration by Frank Reade, Jr., that he was going to enter the Death Valley seemed to utterly terrify Beaver Bill.

The trapper said rigidly:

"Ye don't mean thar, pard?"

"Yes, I do."

"That ye'll enter the valley?"

"Yes."

"Don't ye know thar's dead men down there for that same trick?"

"I do."

"Then why tempt fate?"

"I'm going on a sure thing," replied Frank. "You need not fear at all, my Christian friend. I am safe."

"It's my opinion ye're crazy!"

Frank laughed merrily.

"I'll show you!" he said.

He started to go down the trail, but the big trapper stepped in front of him.

"Hold on, pard!" he said, resolutely. "I'm a bigger man than you."

"Well, what of that?"

"I reckon ye don't know what's fer yer own good. I'm not goin' ter see yer go down thar."

Beaver Bill was in earnest.

Frank saw this at once.

He understood the old trapper's motive readily enough. But he was annoyed at the turn affairs had taken.

"Don't be foolish, Bill," he said. "I know what I'm doing."

"I don't believe ye do."

"Stand aside."

"Not by a jugfull!"

Frank was in a quandary. He did not wish to have any trouble with the big trapper, yet he wanted to carry his point.

"Now, look here, Bill," said he, sternly, "listen to reason."

It was really quite a humorous situation. The big trapper was conscientious, and thought he was doing right.

On the other hand, Frank was confident that he had the right theory in regard to the valley, and that he would be incurring no risk.

But happily at this moment a startling incident terminated the affair.

Footsteps were heard upon the trail above them.

"Some one is coming!" whispered Frank.

In an instant both men glided into the deep shadows.

Down the path came the footsteps. Then a light flashed over the face of the cliff.

The two watchers saw the explanation of this at once.

A man stood upon the verge of the trail overlooking the valley, and in his hand he carried a torch.

One moment he stood there in full view.

He was a type of the westerner, with stout frame and heavy features. That he was one of the band of counterfeiters it was safe to assume.

Then he suddenly began to move the torch up and down making signals.

For full five minutes he continued these signals, closely watched by Frank and the trapper.

Then he turned and went up the trail out of sight and hearing.

Frank drew a deep breath.

"Well, Beaver Bill!" he exclaimed, "what do you think of that?"

"By beavers! I can't make it out!" replied the perplexed hunter.

"Didn't it look as if he was signalling to some one over in the valley?"

"I swar it did!"

Frank laughed quietly.

"And there isn't any doubt but that was what he was doing," he declared. "Ah, do you hear that?"

To the hearing of the two men from the depths of the valley came the sound of voices.

"Somebody is down thar!" exclaimed the astounded trapper.

"What did I tell you?" said Frank, triumphantly.

"Wall, it beats me. I ain't another word to say. Let's go down!"

The trapper started down the trail, Frank followed him.

Once in the canyon they secreted themselves behind huge boulders. They had not long to wait.

The voices drew nearer and then several dark forms entered the canyon coming boldly out of the Death Valley.

Turning from the canyon they went on up the trail. Trapper Bill gripped Frank's hand in the dark. "Yer too deep fer me," he muttered. "I'd never have believed it."

"Don't you see the simplicity of the thing now?" said Frank, eagerly. "We have discovered the secret of the valley. It would be easy enough to find our way through it in the daytime if we could locate those spots where the gas comes up."

"I believe ye," replied Beaver Bill. "I hain't 'nuther word ter say. Jest ye go ahead and I'll foller."

"Well, what had we better do? Go up the trail or take a walk in the valley?"

"Wall, I reckon we had better foller ther trail fust."

"All right."

Frank led the way, and once more they climbed the cliff trail.

They were not far in the rear of the party which had just come out of the valley.

Their voices and footsteps could be plainly heard, and the two scouts pushed ahead to overtake them.

But suddenly the trail ceased its upward course, and Frank and Beaver Bill saw lights ahead.

They had reached the summit of the cliff, and were now upon a broad, level stretch of plateau.

Upon the western side the wall of the plateau jutted down perpendicularly fully a thousand feet into the Death Valley.

From this point a lofty view could be had.

The eastern wall of the plateau jutted down into the Great Basin with a sheer descent.

Indeed, it seemed as if one could not climb this elevation except by means of the one cliff path.

This made it a position which could easily be made almost unsailable.

Yet the counterfeiters did not seem to have taken any precaution of the kind.

Indeed, they had not even posted a guard at the cliff path.

Frank remarked this curiously.

Evidently they did not anticipate or fear an attack. It was at best an unusual state of affairs.

The party in advance of the two reconnoiterers had now half crossed the plateau.

Upon the western side and quite near to the verge a rude structure of stone and logs had been built.

About it were several smaller cabins of logs and boughs.

In fact, it bore the appearance of quite a respectable settlement.

Frank and Beaver Bill gazed upon the scene with interest and surprise.

"Goodness!" exclaimed the young inventor, with amazement. "I had no idea this was such a place. There is quite a den of the rascals here."

"Yer right!" agreed the trapper. "I reckon, though, we've got to work pooty careful in this locality, for we're close onto the foe."

"I agree with you," said Frank. "But I am very curious to see what is inside that stone house."

"Wait a bit," said the trapper, in a cautious manner. "I reckon it'll be a better time to try that arter they've made up ther minds ter turn in fer ther night."

"All right; we will wait awhile."

This they proceeded to do.

Time passed slowly, and then matters seemed to have got quiet in the counterfeiters' camp.

It seemed as if the majority of them must have turned in, and with this belief Frank whispered:

"I think we're safe enough now, Bill."

"All right!" agreed the trapper.

With this they began to creep into the camp. Slowly and cautiously in the deep shadows they made their way toward the stone building. Fortune seemed to favor them.

They met with none of the foe and the coast thus far was clear. Nearer they crept to the stone house.

There was a window upon the western side and up to this Frank crept.

A light flashed out into the night and the sound of hammers could be heard from within.

It was a risky thing to do but Frank crept to the window and peered in.

The sight which met his gaze was an astonishing one.

There was a long bench upon one side of the long room revealed to his gaze and upon it were piles of metal of the spurious kinds.

A furnace yawned at one end of the room and over it Frank saw huge melting pots.

At the bench six men were working with hammers at the counterfeit dies and heaps of the bogus silver dollars and gold eagles lay upon the floor.

It was certainly the bona fide interior of a counterfeiter's den.

Nothing was lacking to make up the entire personnel and outfit.

The counterfeiters were working with great industry. They seemed utterly heedless of surroundings.

"Well, that beats anything I ever saw before," muttered Frank Reade, Jr. "Just take a peep in there Bill."

The trapper complied and was for a moment spell-bound.

"Wall, I swan!" he muttered. "I never saw the equal of that."

"This is the worst den of the kind in America."

"I should say so!"

For some moments the two spies watched the scene.

Then they cautiously withdrew.

In the shadows near they halted and the trapper whispered:

"What's ther next move?"

"Well," said Frank decisively, "it is very evident that unaided we can never hope to capture these miscreants. They are too many for us. The U. S. authorities should be notified and the troops from some fort near here should come to our aid."

Beaver Bill nodded his head.

"Kerect, pard!" he affirmed. "And I kin tell ye jest where ter find ther sogers."

"Where?" asked Frank, eagerly.

"Thar's a hull detachment of 'em up here a ways on Blind river. They're doing some government surveys, I reckon."

"Enough!" exclaimed Frank. "Let us back to the Steam Horse. I will send Barney and Pomp after them immediately."

"That's ther talk."

But Frank's plan was hardly destined to be carried out.

At that moment a harsh, grating laugh sounded near them.

A sardonic voice said:

"I reckon it will be a good long while before you will succeed in bringing soldiers here, senors. Hands up, or you die this instant."

With rapidity and before the two astonished men could act, they were surrounded by dark forms from the gloom.

They had been discovered, and plainly enough, their game was up.

CHAPTER X.

BARNEY AND POMP HAVE LIVELY TIMES.

BUT what of Barney and Pomp?

Left with the Steam Horse to await the return of Frank Reade, Jr., they were not destined to long remain inactive.

In the shadows of the mountain wall it would have seemed that they were safe.

But events close at hand were to disprove this assumption.

Neither were well pleased at having been left behind by Frank Reade, Jr.

"Begorra, I can't see the sinse av Misther Frank's taking that omadhoun with him instid av wan av us," declared Barney, petulantly.

"Dat am a fac', I'ish," agreed Pomp, "fo' instance a callud gen'-man like myself."

"Bedad, av yez had gone wid him ye'd hav' been wuss than the thrapper," blustered Barney, offended at what he considered Pomp's egotism.

"Golly! if Marse Frank had done tuk yo' he neber wud hab got back fo' suah. You're no good nohow."

Left alone, the two faithful servitors were as certain to get to wrangling and skylarking as could be.

It was natural for them to badger each other.

"Whurro! Don't yez give me any av yer slang, naygur!" blustered Barney. "I'll spihle the face av yez!"

"Huh! Yo' bettah jes' spell able fust, Mister Mick."

If there was one thing in the world that would make Barney furious, it was the insinuation that he was Mick.

"Begorra, ye'll take that back or I'll have the heart av ye!" he roared, making a rush at Pomp.

"Hi, hi! Luk out dar, I'ish. I see a dangerous pusson!"

Then down went Pomp's head negro fashion.

It caught Barney full in the stomach. The Hibernian went down in a heap.

For a moment he was wholly unable to find his breath.

Then furiously he scrambled to his feet, but Pomp had taken advantage of the opportunity, and dodged out of the open door of the wagon.

Once outside he began to jeer Barney, to make him all the more furious. In this he succeeded well.

With an imprecation the Celt started in pursuit.

In the excitement of the moment neither thought of the danger of leaving the Steam Horse alone.

Just what was the cause of it they never knew, but somehow or other, possibly the jar of Barney's leap from the wagon, threw the throttle open and the Steam Horse started away.

At the moment the two skylarkers were a dozen yards away.

The sight sobered them in a moment. It was a serious matter.

Away dashed the Steam Horse, with no controlling hand upon the rein.

"Golly, fo' goodness!" yelled Pomp. "We've done made fools ob ourselves dis time, fo' suah."

"Begorra, catch him!" roared Barney. "Shure, phwat will be the ind av this? Misther Frank will have the loife av us."

Away they fled like frightened deer in pursuit.

But they might as well have tried to catch a cyclone.

Away went the Steam Horse at a mad pace into the darkness and was out of sight.

It was an appalling moment.

Never in their roguish lives had Barney and Pomp received such a shock. It was awful to think that it was all owing to careless fooling upon their part.

"Och hone, it's ruined we are," wailed Barney. "Shure Misther Frank niver will fergive us the day."

"Golly! don't I wish I had stayed abo'd de waggin!" wept Pomp.

On they ran in the darkness, stumbling over stones and obstructions.

But nothing could be seen ahead of the Steam Horse.

A thousand awful reflections came to the two servitors. They saw the Steam Horse lying at the bottom of a precipice in a million fragments.

Or it might dash against the wall of a cliff and be shattered.

Again, if by any chance it should be stopped some of the counterfeiters might get possession of it.

All these fears augmented a thousandfold flitted through the minds of the excited and despairing pursuers.

"Golly! where ebber can dat Hoss hab gone to anyhow!" cried Pomp in agony. "We'se done fo' dis time, I'ish."

"Be jabbers, that's thrue enough!"

On they ran wildly.

But the Steam Horse had gone from sight. All effort to catch up with it was futile.

Thoroughly terrified the two servitors were obliged finally to halt.

They were completely exhausted.

They paused by a narrow stream or brook of saline water to rest.

Suddenly Pomp sprang up with a hoarse cry of terror.

"Golly, what am dat?" he gasped. "Jes so suah as yo' am bo'n, fish, dar am dem Injuns a'comin' agin."

The clatter of ponies' hoofs was plainly heard, and they saw the forms of a band of savages outlined against the sky as they rode along an eminence near.

The effect of this upon Barney and Pomp was thrilling.

They stood for a moment so overcome with horror that they could not act.

The savages seemed coming directly toward them.

To fall into the hands of the Comanches would be the worst kind of a fate, and our two friends had no desire in that direction.

Barney was the first to recover.

"Bejabbers, we river must shstay here!" he cried. "Shure it's out av this we must get."

"Yo' bet!" cried Pomp.

"Shure, phwere will we go?"

"Fo' sho' I donno nuffin' tall."

But Barney, in despair, started down the course of the stream.

Pomp followed him.

It proved the very luckiest sort of a move for them.

The Steam Horse had taken this very course.

Just below it had run into a patch of chaparral, which was surrounded with a dense growth of grass and trailing vines.

For fifty yards the Horse had cleaved its way through this growth.

Then it had come to a stop.

The clinging vines had clogged the axles and a swaying branch had caught the throttle rein and shut off power, bringing the monster to a dead stop.

Barney saw the lights of the Horse first and a yell escaped his lips.

"Whurroo! we've found him at lasht," he roared. "Cum on, nayer. Run fer yer loife."

The savages were coming in hot pursuit.

The way the two jokers fled down that slope was a caution to race horses.

Barney reached the wagon first.

He sprang in, seized an ax, and then springing out again began hacking away the obstructions which held the Horse immovable.

The clinging vines yielded of course beneath such treatment.

Pomp cleared the axles and then both dodged into the wagon.

They were not a moment too soon.

Down came the savages howling like dervishes. In a twinkling they had surrounded the Horse.

Arrows and bullets rattled against the lattice work of the wagon.

But Barney seized the throttle rein and turned the Horse about.

Pomp busied himself with his rifle at the loopholes and every shot he fired was sure to count.

The Comanches before such a deadly fire fell back for a moment.

This gave Barney time to turn the Horse about.

The wagon was now free from the incumbrance of the trailing vines and the Horse quickly galloped out of the chaparral.

The Comanches swarmed about now as thick as bees.

But Barney did not deviate in his course.

He pulled the throttle wide open and sent the Steam Horse ahead at a powerful rate of speed.

Into the crowd of savages the machine plunged.

The shock drove them back. The light ponies were thrown aside and their riders unceremoniously tossed.

There was not weight enough to resist the progress of the Steam Horse.

With baffled yells the savages broke ranks and the Horse went through like a thunderbolt.

It was so dark that Barney was at a loss to know just what course to pursue.

But he went straight ahead as it looked to be the safest course. The savages, like a pack of wolves, came yelling on behind.

It was easy for the Steam Horse, however, to keep ahead of them.

If it had been daylight Barney could have amused himself giving the savages a wild chase.

But it was so exceedingly dark that he dared not go too fast.

Pomp kept up his destructive fire just the same, and the savages dropped at every shot.

On and on in the night ran the Steam Horse.

Fortunately thus far they had encountered no obstacle.

The course had been perfectly smooth, with scarcely a pebble to jar them.

But Barney could not hope for this to last.

It seemed as if they had covered several miles when a startling thing happened.

Suddenly lights gleamed just ahead. As well as Barney could determine they were torches.

A chill struck the brave Celt.

What did it mean?

Were there more of the foe in front? If so, they were literally hemmed in.

This would mean a serious matter, and the Celt's grip tightened on the handle of the brake.

"Bejabbers, I wondher phwativer it is?" he muttered.

Certainly there was a band of men in front of them.

The glare of torches could be seen, and the dim outlines of horses and men in the gloom.

Barney saw no way to turn out.

To come to a stop would have been to allow the Comanches to descend upon the Horse.

What was to be done?

There seemed no other way but to forge straight ahead, and take chances of breaking through the line of the new foe.

But suddenly a great light flashed up, which made for some seconds the whole vicinity as plain as day.

It was a signal light, burned by those in front, and Barney saw to his amazement and delight the outlines of a large body of soldiers.

A great cry of joy and triumph went up from the Celt's lips.

Och hone, an' if it ain't sogers they be!" he cried. "Shure, the luck is wid us an' we're safe the while!"

"Golly! yo' don' mean it," cried Pomp, "den dot am a berry lucky fing. Dem sogers can jes' help Marse Frank fo' to catch dem countin'lters."

"Yez are right!" cried Barney.

Then he closed the throttle and applied the brake.

The Steam Horse quickly came to a halt. The result was thrilling.

The Comanches had not yet seen the soldiers and came about the Steam Horse in a legion.

But now up the plain came the stentorian order:

"Attention battalion! Draw sabre! double-quick, forward! Charge!"

The clatter of hoofs, the jingling of accouterments and the wild cheer of the soldiers rose upon the air.

Forward rode the troop in head-long fashion and led by a man with as commanding a figure as Murat.

The flash of their sabres could be seen in the torches' light.

The savages saw them and a panic was created.

At first they seemed inclined to stand their ground.

But their experience with Uncle Sam's troops had heretofore been of the most expensive sort.

So they did not deem it best to risk an encounter.

There was a series of baffled yells, a hustling rush, and away they went into the darkness and out of sight.

But the cavalry came on and in a moment surrounded the Steam Horse.

The tall Murat like captain rode forward, and touching the flat of his sword to the visor of his cap, asked:

"Who are you? Friend or foe?"

"Well, sor," replied Barney, readily, "shure, we're not an enemy."

"No? Well, what in thunder kind of a rig do you call that?"

"Can't ye see fer yersilf?" cried Barney, a little out of patience.

"It looks like a horse made of iron."

"Shure, an' that's phwat it is, but I'd advise ye not to do it any harm."

"Fear not," cried the tall officer. "I am Captain Elmo, of Fort Forty-Five. You don't mean to say that that iron horse can travel of itself?"

"Shure it's a steam horse!" replied Barney. "Did yez niver hear of it afore?"

"No, never!" was the reply. "But who are you?"

"I'm Barney O'Sheal!"

"Do you own that Steam Horse?"

"No, sor. It's the property av Misther Frank Reade, Jr."

"Ah, I see it now!" cried Captain Elmo. "I have heard of Frank Reade, Jr. Did he not travel out here with a Steam Man once?"

"That he did, sor!"

"Then I understand it all. Then you two chaps are Barney and Pomp, eh? Well, I'm glad to see you."

"The same, sor!"

"But where is your master, Mr. Frank Reade, Jr.?"

"Shure, sor, him an' a thrapper chap named Beaver Bill, they have gone up into ther Death Valley Pass, sor, lookin' fer Bert Mason, sor. Yez know him?"

"Bert Mason!" cried Captain Elmo. "Why he is the chap I have been sent up here to find."

"Misther Mary presarve us, an' phat for, sor, do yez want him?"

"He is said to be the leader of a band of counterfeiters who are supposed to have headquarters somewheres about here."

"Shure, sor, it's glad I am to hear av that," cried Barney. "An' it's mesilf as kin tell yez, just where to foind yure man?"

"Where?"

"Shure, sor, up in the Death Pass."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I was well informed, sor!"

"Enough!" cried the captain, "that is then our objective point."

"All right, sor! Are yez goin' there right away?" asked Barney.

"At once!"
 "Shure, sor, don't yez want the sarvices av ther Steam Horse?"
 "Why certainly!"
 "Ye're welcome quite!"
 "Very well. Fall into line with us."
 Barney was not loath to do this. The cavalcade set out at once for Death Valley, and the Steam Horse and Barney and Pomp followed.
 The gray light of dawn was just appearing in the east. The events of the night were rapidly drawing to a close. But fresh scenes were at hand.

CHAPTER XI.

TO THE RESCUE.

THE sensations of Frank Reade, Jr., and the trapper, Beaver Bill, was of a fearful sort when they found themselves surrounded by the outlaws.

It was the Mexican, Castrello, who stood before them.
 There was no use in offering resistance.
 They would have only been shot down in cold blood for it.
 Frank Reade, Jr., realized this, and he was wise enough to keep perfectly quiet.
 "We're in for it, Bill," he whispered. "But never mind. Keep up a good heart."

"Wall, you bet."
 In the hands of the counterfeiters the position of the two captured spies was not of the most reassuring.
 Death, of course was the fate of spies, and Frank reflected that the counterfeiters had no reason for sparing them.

"Hard luck!" groaned Frank. "We are done for, Bill!"
 "Wall, I reckon," agreed the big trapper, "we kain't die but once."
 "There is consolation in that thought," declared Frank.
 Castrello seemed beside himself with joy at the capture. He had the two captives securely bound hand and foot.

Then he said:
 "Perdito! take them into the strong house. See to it that they do not escape!"
 "Si, senor!" replied one of the men, who appeared to be a Spaniard.

The two captives were led to a door in the stone house.
 It was evident that the upper end of the house was used for such purposes as this.

There was not a sign of a window anywhere. The door was opened and the prisoners were thrust into a small ten by twelve chamber. This was as dark as Erebus when the door was closed.

The door formed the only means of ingress and egress. Windows there were none, and no lamp or torch was left to cheer their drooping spirits.

Frank was very much disgusted.
 "I don't understand it," he muttered, dismally.
 "What mought that be, pard?" asked the big trapper.
 "How we came to fall into the hands of these miscreants."
 "I kin see it easily enuff."
 "How?"

"Why, we jest made cussed fools of ourselves. We hadn't orter risked lookin' in that window. They spotted us then."
 "Well, I'm inclined to believe you," muttered Frank, "but the fates have seemed against us. Is there no way that we can escape from this place?"

"Don't see any way."
 "We can't saw a window bar out, for windows there are none. Really, Bill, I'm at my wits' end."

"I'm sorry fer ye, pard. I don't see as we kin do anything better than to wait fer mornin'."

"You are right!" cried Frank. "That is the best we can do."
 Both were much tired and gradually dropped into a light sleep.

This lasted for several hours and was of great benefit to them. Sleep is truly said to be a great restorer.
 Frank felt better when he awoke.

It was lighter in the prison cell now and Frank knew that daylight had come.
 He was secretly wondering what was to come next. Suddenly the door opened and a rough looking man came in.

"So ye've raised, eh?" he said with a gruff manner. "Wall, it's about time."

"Who are you?" asked Frank, curtly.
 "Eh? Wall I'm the chap what watched at this door last night to see that ye didn't get out."

"You are, eh?"
 "Yas!"
 "Well, what do you want?"

"The cap'en, Bert Mason, sent me in to fetch ye two chaps out. He's got a bit of an inquest to hold over ye."

The fellow laughed coarsely at what he considered his witty remark. Frank experienced a queer thrill.

He felt that he was going forth to face death. But it occurred that at last he would be face to face with Bert Mason, the murderer and fugitive from justice.

He offered no resistance, nor did Beaver Bill, and the two men were led out into the open air.
 It was now after sunrise some while and the counterfeiters' camp in every detail was revealed.
 Frank looked about with curiosity.

He saw a squad of fully a score of armed men congregated near the western verge of the plateau.

The two prisoners were led thither and into the center of a circle of the foe.

Sullen glances were bestowed upon them which Frank disregarded wholly. The young inventor knew that his life was sought by these men, and that he was never nearer death in his life.

One of the gang, a short, thickset fellow with lowering eyes and a brutish cast of countenance, advanced.

"Wall, what have you two pilgrims got to say for yourselves?"
 Frank Reade, Jr., knew instinctively that this was the ruffian, Bert Mason, and he eyed him coolly.

"I have nothing to say for myself," he replied, coldly.
 "Ye haven't, eh?"
 "I said so."

Mason glared savagely at the young inventor and hissed:
 "So ye're the chap whom they call Frank Reade, Jr., the inventor, eh?"

"That is my name!"
 "Ye're the man what owns that wonderful Steam Hoss?"
 "I am the man."

"Where's yer hoss now?"
 "I do not know."
 Mason laughed coarsely.

"Had lots of sand to cum into this region with the idee of bringing me to my milk, didn't ye?"
 "Perhaps so."

Frank was cool and perfectly fearless. This maddened the wretch.
 "Cuss ye, I kin tell ye that ye'll never succeed. Ye're in my grip now, an' yer fate will be the same as has overtaken every man here-

tofore who has tried the same game. That's death."
 Frank gazed unflinchingly at Mason.

"Very well," he said, coldly. "I am not afraid to die."
 "Look yonder!"

Mason pointed to the Death Valley.
 "No man who ever goes in there comes out alive," he declared.

"Well, what of it?"
 "That's where I'm going to send you."
 The villain laughed in a fiendish way. He motioned to his men.

"Bring 'em along to the edge, boys," he cried. "We'll soon end the argument."

Beaver Bill was just as cool and nery as Frank was.
 Both men had the pluck to face death coolly and without fear.
 They were led to the verge of the plateau by the counterfeiters.

Below down a sheer descent of fully a thousand feet was Death Valley.
 The hot sands lay below, baking in the blistering sun. Frank saw with an awful chill the purpose of the gang.

This was to throw them over the edge of the plateau.
 It was an awful thought.

If even one should survive the fall, the deadly noxious gases would be sure to terminate life.

Frank realized this with a terrible appalling sense, such as comes to one upon the verge of an awful death.

"God help us!" he reflected. "I think this is the end."
 They were led forward to the verge of the precipice.

"Now I'm going to give ye a chance," cried Mason. "If ye think ye can make the jump ye have a chance for your life. Cut their bonds, men. Ha, ha, ha! I wouldn't give much for your chance."

Two men sprung forward, and with sharp knives cut their bonds.
 "Now say yer prayers!" cried Mason. "Ye'll soon be in Hades."

The villain laughed again uproariously at his ghastly wit.
 But Frank Reade, Jr., conceived of a daring plan at that moment.

He whispered to the trapper:
 "Bill, we have the use of our hands and feet. It is death anyway. Why not make a fight for it?"

"Kerect! I'm with ye!" replied the trapper. "What's the move?"
 "You dash to the right, and I'll go to the left."

"Ready!" yelled Mason. "One—"
 He did not finish counting. With the rapidity of lightning the two prisoners leaped in opposite directions.

There was the report of a pistol held in Mason's hand.
 The bullet whistled by Frank Reade, Jr.'s, ear.

But the young inventor did not pause. He rushed madly into the arms of one of the guards.

Before the fellow could make resistance Frank had struck him a terrific blow in the stomach which stretched him out upon the ground.

Then he sped away across the plateau like a deer.
 Rifle bullets followed him, and though his clothes were shot full of holes, miraculously he was not injured.

But Beaver Bill was having a decidedly harder time.
 He had been clutched by several of the foe, and a lively struggle followed.

The trapper was the center of a struggling mass of the counterfeiters, but was making a valiant struggle, when a loud yell of alarm went up on the air.

Frank, in his flight across the plateau, suddenly heard a thrilling sound.

He turned his head and clear to his hearing came the shrill whistle of the Steam Horse.

"Barney and Pomp!" he gasped. "What has brought them here?"

Sure enough, across the plateau, at whirlwind speed, came the Steam Horse.

But directly behind the horse was a body of United States troops, with Captain Elmo at their head.

They came down at a swinging gallop upon the counterfeiter's den. Bert Mason with dismay had seen the whole affair. The villains gave a yell of terror and running to the edge of the plateau disappeared.

In a twinkling every one of the counterfeiters had disappeared in the same manner.

The trapper Beaver Bill was left standing alone in the middle of the plateau not in the least harmed.

"Wall, by thunder!" he cried. "What skeered them off that way?"

Then he chanced to look up and see the soldiers and the Steam Horse.

A yell of triumph went up from the excited trapper's lips.

"Hooray!" he shouted, "that's the stuff. We're all hunky now, I swan!"

The next moment the two erstwhile prisoners were standing beside the Steam Horse, and talking with Barney and Pomp and Captain Elmo.

The rescuers had come just in the nick of time.

CHAPTER XII.

FATE OF THE COUNTERFEITERS.

THERE was no question about this.

A little delay and the two prisoners would no doubt have passed in their final accounts.

As it was hardly likely that Frank would have been able to have escaped from the plateau.

It was, however, they were safe and there was good reason for self-congratulations. It had been a narrow escape.

The soldiers were looting the stone house of the counterfeiters. Bushels of counterfeit coin was seized and all the tools and dies in use.

It was a big haul, and not for years had so extensive a den as this been discovered.

But Captain Elmo was not satisfied.

The ringleader and indeed nearly all of the gang were at large.

Frank Reade, Jr., was desirous of effecting the capture of Bert Mason, as the villain's identification was necessary to save the life of Benjamin Astley.

Captain Elmo was presented to Frank Reade, Jr., by Barney and the two men had a lively conversation.

"I have been looking for Mason for a long while!" declared Elmo.

"It is lucky we happened to meet, for if I had caught him I should have hung him to the nearest tree, and then your man, Astley, would have remained unidentified."

"Yet if we do not capture Mason, I fear my man is lost!" said Frank.

"Your're right; he is at large now at least."

"Yes."

"But we must capture him. Where do you think he has gone?"

"Come with me and I will answer that question!" said Frank.

The young inventor led the way to the verge of the plateau.

"He went out of sight in this direction," he said.

"What!" exclaimed the captain, aghast. "You don't mean to say that he actually leaped over into the valley?"

"I don't know. I only saw him disappear about here."

"But I can see no way of climbing down here."

"Nor I. It may be possible that he committed suicide here, but I doubt it."

"What then is your opinion?"

"There must be some secret way of getting down the face of the cliff here."

"Let us examine."

For some while the two men made a close examination of the vicinity. But this resulted in nothing.

"The mystery is yet unexplained," declared Captain Elmo.

"So it is," agreed Frank. "Now I will advance a theory."

"Pray, do so."

"Of course you understand the nature of that valley down there and its sandy trail of death?"

"I understand that the bodies of many victims to the peculiar atmosphere of the valley yet lie down there."

"Yes."

"And that it is not safe for any person to venture into the place."

"Quite wrong, sir!"

"What?"

"It is quite safe for anybody to cross that valley."

The captain looked astonished.

"I fail to comprehend," he said.

"I will modify my statement," said Frank, "and affirm that there are times when it is safe to cross the valley."

"Ah, that is quite as surprising. What time or when is it safe?"

"At night."

The captain cleared his throat and looked quizzically at Frank.

"Have you tried it?"

"No."

"Ah! Then do not."

"To the contrary, I will try it, and prove to you that I mean what I say this very night."

"Do not do anything rash."

"What is more, I will capture the counterfeiters for you at the same time if you will follow my directions."

"What are they?"

"Post soldiers at near intervals all around the valley. The rascals certainly are hiding in some place in the cliffs."

"Ah! what is their purpose?"

"Escape! They will in the night cross the death valley and get away from us."

The captain was much impressed with Frank's statements.

"I have no intention of disputing you, Mr. Reade," he said, quietly, "or of seeking to know how you get your information."

"Simply by observing a few natural phenomena in connection with the valley."

"Ah!"

"I will show you more clearly to-night."

"Then I will follow your directions to a dot. I suppose that by to-morrow we shall have the counterfeiters all in our power."

"I think so."

The captain went back to his men.

He proceeded to follow Frank's instructions carefully.

Men were placed at intervals along the plateau and with rifle shot completely around the valley.

Unless there was some unknown exit by means of a secret cavern, Frank could not see how the counterfeiters could escape.

The day was spent in overhauling and exploring Mason's den.

Towards night Frank, with Barney and the trapper, Beaver Bill, went to the verge of the plateau.

Pomp was left with the Steam Horse by the stone house.

Frank's theory was that the counterfeiters were secreted beneath the cliffs and were waiting simply for night to enable them to find their way across the valley.

But how they had gone down over the edge of the cliff seemed a mystery.

This, however, Beaver Bill soon solved in a curious manner.

The trapper found several stout iron rings imbedded in out of the way crevices of the cliff.

His theory was logical.

"I tell ye, I reckon they had double lengths of lariat passed through these rings," he declared. "They evidently had this all fired anticipating an attack some time."

"Borra, I can see that," cried Barney, "but howiver did they go down and be after taking the ropes wid thim?"

"Easy enough, pard," replied the trapper, "the lariats were doubled an' by jest untying a knot they could pull the rope down arter 'em, an' ye couldn't foller in the same way."

There was no doubt but that Beaver Bill had hit the nail on the head.

All accepted this hypothesis as a correct one. But darkness was coming on rapidly now.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE END.

WITH the coming of darkness the curious phenomena of the valley again manifested itself.

It was a wonderful scene.

But Frank took Captain Elmo to the verge of the plateau and said:

"I told you that I would explain my theory to you to-night. If you will look closely you will see that those curious balls of light dancing up from the ground exist only in sections."

"I do observe that fact," agreed Captain Elmo.

"Very good. Now the noxious gas which overcomes one in crossing the valley comes only from those spots. Wherever those balls of light are not to be seen there is no gas, and it is consequently safe to travel."

The captain was deeply impressed with this explanation.

"Upon my word, Mr. Reade," he cried, "that is strong logic!"

"I thought you would agree to it. Now those cunning rascals of counterfeiters are aware of the fact and cross the valley with impunity at any time of night."

"But—but what of the nuggets of gold which are said to tempt the unwary into the place? If they were able to enter and close the valley, why should Mason and his gang need to manufacture counterfeit money?"

Frank snapped his fingers.

"That for the nuggets of gold!" he declared. "Ten to one they are worthless iron pyrites. But we will investigate that later. Ah! what did I tell you?"

With this excited cry Frank pointed down into the valley.

Dark forms were seen to flit into the shadows between the dancing sections of gas fire. That they were the counterfeiters bent on escape there was no doubt.

"Heavens! there they are!" gasped the captain. "What shall we do?"

"Explain the secrets of the valley to your men. Close in upon them and—"

But Frank Reade, Jr., did not finish the sentence.

The captain clutched his arm.

"My God!" he cried, "there is the end of half of them!"

A startling incident had occurred in the valley, which was so vivid and horrible as to leave its impress upon the minds of the spectators forever.

Suddenly half a dozen of the counterfeiters were seen to become enveloped in what seemed like a momentary flash of blue flame.

Then their bodies were seen lying upon the sand, and the ghostly balls of light were seen dancing above them.

"Heavens! How do you explain that?" gasped the captain.

"They must have unluckily stepped upon an undeveloped mine of the gas," replied Frank. "It has come up suddenly and overpowered them."

"Ah, might not that same fate overcome us if we should try to cross the valley?"

"It is not impossible," agreed Frank. "But——"

He never finished the sentence.

A thrilling cry went up from the lips of all the spectators at that moment.

The surviving counterfeiters were to be seen running wildly across the valley.

Suddenly there was a low, sullen roar, and the whole valley seemed alive with a blue flame.

Even those on the cliffs were hurled back, and cries of horror went up.

When, the next moment, the exhibition subsided, the bodies of all of the counterfeiters were seen far out in the deadly sands.

Once too often they had dared the deadly perils of Satan's Hole. It was a horrible, awful thought to the awestruck spectators.

Frank Reade, Jr., stood like one dumbfounded.

"FRANK READE, JR., WITH HIS NEW STEAM HORSE AND THE MYSTERY OF THE UNDERGROUND RANCH."

Bert Mason was among the doomed ones. In a moment, as it were, the entire gang was wiped out. But Frank was only thinking of poor Astley.

"Come," said Capt. Elmo huskily, "I believe that valley is a part of hell. Let us get out of here as quickly as possible."

None had any desire to remain longer in the vicinity of the Sandy Trail of Death. Silently, and with a keen sense of horror they picked up their belongings and left the spot behind them forever.

But Benjamin Astley did not suffer death upon the gallows for a crime of which he was wholly innocent.

Enough evidence had been found to substantiate the fact that he was not identical with Bert Mason who had perished in Satan's Hole.

So he was released from prison a happy man and restored to his faithful friends and his happy bride.

All this was certainly due to the disinterested kindness of Frank Reade, Jr., and Astley expressed his gratitude in warmest terms.

The story spread all over the country and Frank Reade, Jr., was eulogized as the prince of benefactors and philanthropists.

The Steam Horse, however, was not destined to long remain idle. Almost as soon as he returned to Readestown Frank became interested in another thrilling case, the full details of which may be found in exciting form in No. 10 of the FRANK READE LIBRARY, entitled:

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